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SIPDIS

KATHMANDU FOR REFCOORD MWEINBERG
BANGKOK FOR REFCOORD TSCHERER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [SCUL](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: EMBASSY COLOMBO P-1 REQUEST

REF: COLOMBO 596

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRES VALERIE C. FOWLER. REASONS: 1.4 (B, D
)

¶1. (SBU) This is an action request for PRM,s Admissions
Office.

¶2. (SBU) SUMMARY AND ACTION REQUEST: Post requests access
to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) for a Sri
Lankan national well-known to the Embassy Public Affairs
Section who is planning to flee the country within days.
Poddala Jayantha has faced increasing threats and attacks in
his position as a leading journalist and advocate for media
freedom. In light of a violent June 1 attack which
necessitated his surgery and hospitalization (Ref A) and
subsequent threats, Post believes he faces a well-founded
fear of persecution. Poddala is well-known to the Embassy,
and has been a key contact for PAS for years. PAO has
remained in close contact with Poddala about the increasing
threats, including visiting him in the hospital after he was
attacked and seeking DRL assistance for him under the Human
Rights Defenders Fund. Poddala will flee Sri Lanka to a
country in Asia which does not provide asylum; Post requests
his consideration under the USRAP. END SUMMARY.

¶3. (C) Basic biodata for Poddala and dependents follow:

Principal Applicant: ATTOTAGE Prema Jayantha
AKA: PODDALA Jayantha
Date of Birth: June 28, 1964
Place of Birth: Galle, Sri Lanka
Nationality: Sri Lankan
Gender: Male

Name: DAHANAYAKE MUDIYANSELAGE Kalyane
Relationship to PA: Wife

Date of Birth: June 7, 1968
Place of Birth: Colombo, Sri Lanka
Nationality: Sri Lankan
Gender: Female

Name: ATTOTAGE PODDALA Husulee Induware
Relationship to PA: Daughter
Date of Birth: June 14, 1997
Place of Birth: Colombo, Sri Lanka
Nationality: Sri Lankan
Gender: Female

BACKGROUND

¶4. (SBU) Poddala has been one of Sri Lanka's leading
advocates for greater media freedom. He is the President of
the Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association and a member of

the Free Media Movement. He has organized numerous public demonstrations demanding greater rights and protection for the media and has won several awards from media advocacy groups for his work. Over the past several years, Poddala received numerous threats stemming from his media advocacy work, ending with a violent attack against him on June 1, 2009. In September 2009 he was elected by his peers to be President of the Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association. Since his election, threats have continued.

15. (C) In May 2008, Poddala and a colleague were summoned by Secretary of Defense (and brother of the President) Gotabaya Rajapaksa, and reprimanded over a protest campaign organized by five Sri Lankan media organizations against the abduction and assault of another Sri Lankan journalist. The Secretary of Defense told them that if both journalists continued criticizing the military, the Government couldn't prevent actions being taken against them by groups or individuals who "revere" Army Commander Fonseka.

16. (C) According to Poddala, following the January 2009 murder of Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickremantunge, threats against him intensified. He left the country for one month. He returned to Sri Lanka due to concerns for his family, who had remained in Sri Lanka.

17. (C) Beginning on May 27, 2009, the Sri Lankan press reported widely comments made by Army Commander Fonseka and the Inspector General of Police (IGP) Jayantha Wickramaratne.

Both stated that LTTE cadres now in custody had disclosed the names of journalists who were funded by the LTTE. General Fonseka claimed that most of these journalists were Sinhalese, some were members of organizations advocating greater media freedom, and some had secret meetings with the LTTE. Both Fonseka and Wickramaratne labeled the journalists as traitors and said that action would be taken against them.

The state-owned television station ITN carried a report on the Inspector General's comments on its May 28th broadcast. While ITN reported the Inspector General's remarks, it broadcast images of protests, meetings, and gatherings of media trade unions and advocacy organizations. The camera zoomed in on the faces of individual members and leaders of those groups, including Poddala. On May 29, 2009, Poddala and two other media advocates met with PAO and expressed fears for their safety following the broadcast. In particular, they were worried that statements by the Army Commander and the IGP would engender a new wave of violence against journalists by ultranationalist gangs and thugs.

18. (SBU) On June 1, 2009, Poddala was kidnapped on a Colombo street. During the couple of hours he was in captivity, he was tortured and then dumped along a road. He suffered multiple fractures to his leg, a severe burn on his foot, internal injuries in his abdomen, and cuts and bruises on his head. As a way to further humiliate him, his head and beard were shaved and hair stuck in his mouth to muffle his screams. According to Poddala, before the abductors left him on the roadside, they told him, "if you ever work in Sri Lanka again, we will kill you and your family." He required surgery on June 3 and was hospitalized for weeks; PAO visited Poddala during his hospital stay.

19. (C) On June 2, following the attack on Poddala, former CDA Moore spoke with Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa. Charge expressed his concern at the most recent assault on a journalist. Echoing Gotabhaya Rajapaksa's warnings to the journalists a year prior, Basil responded that "the public" is angry and the government could not control these passions.

110. (C) In September 2009, Poddala was elected by his peers to be President of the Sri Lanka Working Journalist Association, and he attended the opening of the new offices of the SLWJA. The English and Sinhala press covered the event. On October 3, 2009 he again received threats from unknown callers. The threats led Poddala to flee the country, this time with his family. Post has endeavored to assist Poddala through the DRL Human Rights Defenders Fund.

¶11. (SBU) In light of the violence and escalating threats Poddala has faced as a leading media advocate in Sri Lanka, Post requests his access to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. The Regional Refugee Coordinator concurs with this request. While the current PAO at post has come to know Poddala through the threats and violence he has faced, Poddala has been a leading journalist and key Embassy contact for years. Post appreciates PRM/A,s prompt consideration of this request.

FOWLER